The Messenger Model

An Initial Summary

The texts by Benjamin, Nancy, Serres, Debray, and Peters are all extremely different. It may seem peculiar to invoke these authors as ‘introductions’ to the theme of mediality when only the last one actually discusses concrete media, yet this is quite deliberate. I want to debate the question of ‘What is a medium?’ from the very beginning in the context of mediality. ‘Mediality’ does not refer to media that are distinct from each other, like sound, text, and image, but rather its aim is to describe an elementary dimension of human life and culture.

Consider, therefore, the following question: Is there a vanishing point at which all five authors meet, regardless of the fact that their approaches are all so divergent? This point of convergence actually stands out. It is their mutual consideration of the way in which the relationship of the self to the other and to the world is fundamentally mediated through transmission processes, and because these processes tend to be invisible their mediation appears to be ‘immediate’.

This idea can be divided into a series of distinct but related statements:

1. The starting point for a reflection on mediality is the assumption of a difference between the communicants, which can be understood qualitatively as their diverseness or quantitatively as their distance from each other.
2. Media do not transform this difference into identity by simply replacing diversity with agreement, but rather they make communal existence possible while maintaining this difference.
3. The primary function of media is transmission. Media do not directly produce anything; they do not possess any demiurgical power. Methodologically it makes more sense to describe them as middle, mediator, and milieu rather than an instrument or a medium.
4. The conditions of transmission constitute the source of culture.
5. Transmission is an external, corporeal, and material process that can be conceived as a kind of embodiment while at the same time it is also associated with a ‘disembodiment’ – namely, the way in which media ‘become invisible’ in their (interference-free) usage.
6. Non-reciprocity is a structural feature of communication under conditions of difference.
Traces of this web of ideas can be found among each of the authors:

For Walter Benjamin the Fall of Man was a symbol of the origin of difference between people, which was revealed in the form of gender differences. Not only was it possible to distinguish between good and evil, but they were also split, which was conducive to mediatization. While the divine word possessed a demiurgical power, as God created by naming, human words lost this creative power and language became a medium of denotation and recognition. It is therefore this loss of genuine creative power that reduced media for the first time to mere instruments and sensory organs and made them congreneric to the technical and symbolic: The performativity of divine language did not distinguish between the technical and the semiotic, as the act of naming directly brought something into existence. A reflection of the original creativity of the medial can emerge (once again) only when the human is hypostatized precisely not as a demiurge and media are stripped of their instrumental character in the sense of their technical and/or semiotic functionality and transmission is readily appreciated as a genuine form of productivity. I will later investigate Benjamin’s own version of transmission, namely translation, in more detail. It is sufficient here to clarify that Benjamin, more than anyone else, was a forward thinker concerning technical media, as his early writings on the philosophy of language blazed a trail to a non-instrumentalized concept of media.

For Jean-Luc Nancy, unlike Benjamin, there is no longer any memory of a condition prior to ‘difference’. Humans only exist as individuals together with others, and they are therefore always already divided into singular exteriorities that are situated at a distance from each other. Difference is nevertheless ‘defused’ for Nancy, as it has become a next-to-one-another, which can be revealed thus far as being with-one-another, as it involves circulation and exchange between co-existing people. ‘Communicating’ is therefore necessary, but in an entirely unspectacular sense. It refers not to the sharing of common beliefs or identical meanings, but rather to an external sharing of places that become a milieu in the sense of an intermediate space that enables the separation of individuals while at the same time connecting them. Mediation can thus be conceived as a virtual connection or an external and corporeal co-existence that does not (any longer) unify the collective into a whole.

As with Nancy, Michel Serres also sees connection as a basic process – imaginarily modelled in the figure of Hermes and the angel – that is essential to medial transmission. For Serres, however, the multiplicity into which societies are divided loses the homogeneity that Nancy still maintained and becomes heterogeneous instead. A trace of this heterogeneous starting point is preserved and becomes apparent in the fact that the community-forming
moment of transmission presupposes that order must be maintained against interference from outside, against the accidental, and against the influence of third parties. Serres describes the power of transmission to immunize against external influences as the inner mechanism of our use of symbols, which applies equally to a mathematician’s theoretical practice as well as a community’s ability to establish a connection by excluding third parties. The figure of the third nevertheless returns in the form of the parasite, which becomes an actor in an unequal exchange and thus a one-sided connection: the streams of global transmissions do not correspond to the model of reciprocal exchange, but rather they lead to inequality and imbalance. Media – precisely because their performance is based on transmission and mediation – do not simply facilitate encounters with non-reciprocal situations, but rather they literally give rise to non-reciprocity itself. This marks a radical departure from the assumption that mediation is based on or results in the communal sharing of something.

For Régis Debray, culture is also based on a spatial and temporal difference, which poses the question of how the formation of tradition is possible at all. Transmission is also central to his work, as his mediological materialism posits the fundamental exteriority and materiality of transmission processes. Transmission is conceived as an act of embodiment or the formation of traces, as its power enables the spatial transmission and temporal preservation of the spiritual and the ideal. This materialization of the ideal is also understood as an act of production, as the object does not precede its transmission. Transportation is always at the same time understood as a form of transformation, and transmission is always also understood as a form of transubstantiation. Debray’s materiality is therefore not opposed to the ideal, but rather it is the only possible way of realizing the ideal, as it involves circulating ideas across space and time. Circulation and communication converge.

The idea of communication as dialogue thus becomes problematic for each of these thinkers in their own way: Benjamin challenges the view that the decisive factor in communication consists of the fact that people communicate something through language; Nancy does not identify the sharing of something with-one-another as part of the traditional notion of communication as agreement; Serres sees non-reciprocity as the basic condition of the social; Debray subordinates communication to transmission from the very beginning, insofar as transmission can illuminate what communication means, but the reverse is not true.

The terrain is thus prepared for John Durham Peters’s thesis that one-sided dissemination, the sending of messages, does not constitute a
subvariety of communication, but rather it is equally as worthy as dialogical ‘near communication’. Moreover, the distancing unfamiliarity between the communicants is already a constituent element of dialogue itself. The point is that the disseminative structure of interpersonal communication valorizes the listener: It is the receivers, the recipients, and not simply the speakers who carry the responsibility for uttered speech to fall on fertile soil. In addition, communication is no longer conceived as the confluence of mental states, but rather it is accepted as a kind of dance where contact is only temporary.

The Messenger as a Topos

The messenger appears to be an extremely archaic figure; a relic of an epoch when non-personal communication was not yet available. The figure of the messenger may appear misplaced and obsolete in a systematic media-theoretical study written in an age of split-second connections through worldwide data networks. Nevertheless, I want to employ the messenger hereafter as a reflection figure, and I present the following analogy to explain its methodological significance: The idea of the errand functions as the ‘zero point’ in a coordinate system in which different modalities of transmission can be listed from many different fields, like religion, medicine, economics, linguistics, psychoanalysis, and law. Within this coordinate system – it is assumed – it then becomes clear how media can be understood from their position in the middle as mediators. But to start with it is first necessary to explicate this ‘zero point’, which I would like to call the ‘messenger model’.

In a distant echo of the deductive sciences it could also be said that the messenger perspective alters our ‘axiom system’ insofar as the ‘primal scene’ of communication is no longer interactive, voice-based dialogue in close proximity to the body, but rather communication between parties who are separated from each other in time and space. Benjamin, Nancy, and Serres have already suggested that communication presupposes separation, division, and difference between the communicants. Debray and Peters have also called attention to the fact that due to this distance transmission proves to be an elementary dimension of communication itself.

I therefore take as my starting point the idea that the mediality of communication will become clearer in the ‘laboratory conditions’ of communication in absentia. At the same time, however, referring back to the messenger involves more than simply a media-theoretical thought
experiment that focuses on an extreme case in order to better understand its significance under normal conditions. My assumption is that reflecting on messenger-mediated ‘absence communication’ will also change our understanding of ‘presence communication’. The messenger idea only becomes interesting when it is assumed that being distant from one another – in either an internal or external sense – constitutes a fundamental aspect of all communication.

Dimensions of the ‘Messenger Model’
So what does the messenger do? He mediates between heterogeneous worlds by transmitting messages. This fact is extremely straightforward, but it is more revealing to distinguish between the five dimensions of the ‘messenger model’: distance, heteronomy, thirdness, materiality, and finally indifference.

(i) Distance as Heterogeneity: Whenever communication is described using the messenger perspective, it always involves communication that is informed and shaped by distance. This distance is not at all limited to spatial distance, but rather it also encompasses other forms of diversity that make communicants entirely foreign and incomprehensible to one another, such as their different histories, singular experiences, varying opinions, different bodies of knowledge, and practical orientations. Communication – if you recall Benjamin and Nancy – presupposes separation and division. People are always with one another at the same time that they are apart from one another and thus individuals.

Emmanuel Levinas emphatically thematized this irresolvable distance from one another as the basis of all communication. According to Levinas, the fact that communicants are identified as ego and alter ego is already proof of the egocentricity of understanding, which is inscribed in Western self-consciousness insofar as it is oriented towards understanding others using the model of Odysseus’s voyage, which is a return to the self.4 For Levinas, on the other hand, a conversation represents an encounter that does not treat the being of the other as an egological projection of one’s own consciousness; rather, it is able to recognize and maintain the otherness of others. And it is no surprise that this refusal to minimize the strangeness and mystery of others culminates in a concept, namely the ‘trace’, that bears a subtle resemblance to the idea of the messenger. I will later address the ‘involuntary messenger of the trace’. What matters here is that distance is inherent to any communication.

The messenger bridges distances but does not eliminate them; mediation and separation are intertwined in the figure of the messenger. Doesn’t this
ambiguity – the simultaneous overcoming and preservation of distance – resonate in the German word ‘Ent-fernung’?5

Distance, heterogeneity, difference between communicants thus marks the starting point of my discussion of the errand. I will thereby forego a metatheoretical consideration of the philosophically provocative question of whether it is possible to talk about the meaning of ‘difference’ at all, insofar as this precedes all different ways of speaking. My reflection on the errand is intended to address not the question of what heterogeneity and difference are, but rather ‘only’ how to deal with them.

From the perspective of ‘distance communication’ the messenger is situated in an intermediate space between heterogeneous worlds (systems, fields, etc.). His operative function is to be a mediator between these worlds; in light of this operative function he represents the nucleus of a media theory. But how does this mediation take place? To start with, the messenger speaks – but with a foreign voice.

(2) Heteronomy as Speaking with a Foreign Voice: This is one of the provocative – and at the same time essential – aspects of the messenger model: the messenger is heteronomous, which is understood here in opposition to ‘autonomous’.6 He is not self-activating, he is subordinate to a ‘foreign law’, and he acts on behalf of another: he has a mission. The messenger is ‘guided by outside forces’.

Whenever messengers are thematized, one is confronted with the difference between vertical/sacred transmission and horizontal/secular transmission. An example of vertical transmission is Hermes, who delivers the messages of the gods to mortals. It is advantageous for this task that he is the protective deity of streets and businesses, that he combines scholarship and trickery, and also that he is not averse to thievery. He thus maintains his close proximity to the all-too-human, which is essential because he must translate the divine messages in a way that will be accessible to the people.7 As Schniewind noted, the biblical words ‘angelos’ (messenger) and ‘angelia’ (annunciation and message) are not derived from the language of religion, mysticism, or philosophy, but rather from the language of public life.8 Bernhard Siegert also pointed out that the angel as messenger of God (angeloi) is etymologically derived from the ‘angaréion’, the attendants of the Persian relay post system.9 The mythical and religious connections between God and man are etymologically drawn from the prose of a postal principle.

Other vertical messengers include poets, the ‘interpreters of the gods’, and rhapsodists, the ‘interpreters of the poets’, whose task is to bear witness. It is precisely this task – bearing witness to a knowledge acquired
through divine inspiration rather than effort, for which the messenger is not responsible – that reduces poets to ‘unconscious’ mediators in the sense of Plato’s Socratic dialogue, and the criticism of these poets thus becomes the genuine task of philosophy: the overcoming of angelia through logos represents the origin of a philosophical discourse oriented towards truth. In this context, the messenger becomes an inauthentic speaker.

It is also evident in the horizontal dimension of mediation that the messenger serves as a proxy for foreigners, as in the case of ambassadors, nuntius, and legatus. Many aspects of the messenger function originate here. Isn’t the messenger at the same time also an extension of the body of his employer, who is not only represented by the messenger but rather also made present in time and space? Aren’t messengers always also visualizations of an authority in absentia insofar as whoever can be represented as if they were present in their representative is sovereign?

Indeed, messengers are always also part of a ‘telecommunications of power’ insofar as they not only communicate but also secure territory through their dissemination of the word. The Old High German word ‘biotan’ and the Middle High German word ‘bieten’, from which the word ‘Bote’ (messenger) is derived, take on the connotations of order, command, and prohibition and emerge as both ‘decree’ and ‘interdiction’.

In an entirely different way, the nature of being-sent becomes apparent in the smooth transition between the messenger and impersonal transmission technologies like the letter: it is no accident that in Middle High German the words ‘Bote’ (messenger) and ‘Brief’ (letter) can be substituted for each other.

The institution of the messenger thus encompasses a variety of differentiations, from the medial extension of the body of the employer to the borrowed authority of the personal representative to the simple act of delivery as well as the privileged interpretation of the messages, and all of these roles are tied to a common assumption: the activity of the messenger does not arise from self-conscious spontaneity, but rather it is subordinate to foreign directives; his ‘sovereignty’ can simply explore the space of heteronomy. There is therefore always an outside of media.

(3) Thirdness as Nucleus of Sociality: The messenger establishes a relation. The messenger makes a social relation possible between people who are distant from one another insofar as he is not only sent but rather also directed to someone to whom he has something to ‘offer’. It is no accident that the concept of ‘relation’ refers etymologically to reporting (‘relatio’ in Latin and ‘Bericht’ in Middle High German). The messenger’s intermediary position between the addressee and the addressee gives rise to an
elementary ‘communication community’. The messenger is essential for the formation of this community, but he does not appear as its subject. We are accustomed to thematizing intersubjective relationships in dual or dyadic structures: speaker and listener (Searle, Habermas), sender and receiver (Shannon), ego and alter ego (Parsons, Luhmann), producer and recipient, master and slave (Hegel), me and you (Buber). From the standpoint of these binary-oriented theories of intersubjectivity, the emergence of a third appears to be disturbing, parasitic, and alienating. But, as Joachim Fischer asks, aren’t ‘dyadic figures also latent triangles’ so that a third figure is also combined with the binarity of the one and the other? Our personal pronouns (I, you, he/she, we, they) testify to how deeply engrained the third is in our everyday practices. The social sciences and social theories focus on the third as a figure of analysis between alterity and plurality. Doesn’t this transition to the third represent the point at which interactions (can) transform into institutions?

This reveals a wide and colourful spectrum of trinities, which includes spectators, translators, mediators, judges, scapegoats, parasites, arbitrators, traitors, etc. Most importantly, the messenger also emerges in this series of triadic actors. And it is Joachim Fischer who first drew serious attention to the messenger in the course of a general social theory of the third, from which he developed a social theory of the medium: insofar as the messenger is conceived as a figuration of the third, the ‘social potential of the medium’ is foregrounded as opposed to its ‘technical potential’.

The fragility of the messenger institution is also embedded in this sociality of the messenger from the very beginning, which makes it predestined to be an unstable figure. Because the communicants are inaccessible to each other, the relevant question becomes whether the messenger will maintain his heteronomous status and the neutrality it implies or whether he will ‘go wild’ as the sovereign and manipulator of ‘his’ messages by omitting, distorting, or inventing. As a figuration of the third, the medium is always also an interruption and thus a breaking point: it can breed ill blood, sow the seeds of discord, contrive intrigues, play people off against each other, betray, and agitate. Mediation is thus symbolically and diabolically two-faced: it can be a symbolic act (throwing together) as well as a diabolical intrusion (dividing apart). The diabolical misdeed is always inscribed as an option in the function of the third and the messenger.

(4) Materiality as Embodiment: The purpose of the messenger is to eliminate distance through his own movement, a movement whose meaning consists not in bearing correspondences but rather in producing them. Historically, the verb ‘to correspond’, in the sense of ‘agreement’, refers
to the noun ‘correspondence’ as reporting or exchanging letters. There is a peculiarly tense relationship between the mobility of the messenger and the expected identity and stability of the messages entrusted to him. The messenger is supposed to not only convey the message, but also at the same time preserve it from potential interference over the course of space and time. The message is only mobile in the sense that it is externally embodied in a material carrier, but its internal contents are supposed to be kept as immobile as possible. Is this the birth of the separation of signifier and signified from the spirit of the errand? This is what a message always is: regardless of its origin, it must always be separable and transportable. Linguistic statements congeal into physiognomic texture; meaning materializes in the sensuality of the body. Speech becomes something ‘external’ to the messenger. The statement crystallizes as a recitation, an *imitatio soni*.

The message belongs to a continuum of materiality that also encompasses the corporeality of the messenger. The message is entrusted to and incorporated into his mimesis or ‘physical memory’. Incorporation and excorporation thus intersect in the messenger. To safeguard the message it was customary not only to insure its authentic reproduction but also to authenticate the messenger’s body through signs or tokens. To return once again to the embodiment of the employer: the *nuntius* was considered to be ‘the body of the ruler suspended over his borders’. Through the delivery of his message the messenger also represented at the same time the coming-to-appearance of his employer, a kind of profane epiphany. And it is no surprise – as Horst Wenzel notes – that the immunity of the messenger was constantly at risk, as it was not uncommon for the messenger to be rewarded or punished depending on ‘his’ message.

As a part of a continuum of materiality, the messenger therefore moves in an intermediate space that is an ‘extension of the senses’. In other words, the exterior space of the senses is the messenger’s base of operations. *The phenomenon of the separation of sense and sensuality, text and texture, and form and content take on a palpable form in the figure of the messenger.*

(5) Indifference as Self-Neutralization: When messages are sent, they usually involve important communications. Messages are emotionally moving, they are surprising, they bring their receivers happiness or sorrow. Yet the messenger behaves indifferently towards the content of his message. He remains apathetic with regard to what he says. After all, he is a sign carrier precisely because he ignores and is exempt from the meaning of the signs he carries. He is able to remember signifiers so well because he is allowed to forget what they signify.
The messenger occupies the middle, which means that he is not biased. The neutrality of the middle is the basis of the mediator’s position.\textsuperscript{25} This indifferent position becomes evident in the messenger’s tendency to withdraw or recede, thereby foregrounding his message. The embodiment of a foreign voice is only possible by surrendering one’s own voice through a form of selflessness that is inscribed in the functional logic of the messenger and for that matter also constitutes the ethos of his office: \textit{the visualization of the foreign through self-neutralization}. What is different or surprising about a message only takes shape against the background of the messenger’s own indifference. Remember: the disappearance of the medium in the syllogism and the motif of the dying messenger both refer etymologically to this self-withdrawal, on which the mediality of the messenger office is based. It is also a prerequisite for the magical real presence of the absent employer, who can become operative through the messenger.

Is it necessary to emphasize that this ‘symbolic withdrawal’ of the medium also enables its ‘diabolical inversion’?

There are therefore five important attributes of the messenger model: (1) He connects heterogeneous worlds and allows them to ‘flow’ into one another. (2) He is not self-determined but rather heteronomous and thus speaks with a foreign voice. (3) He embodies the figure of a third and thus enables the formation of sociality. (4) He is embedded in a continuum of materiality, operates in an intermediate space that represents an extension of the senses, and thus draws on the separation between text and texture, sense and form. (5) He is a self-neutralizing entity that makes something else appear through his own withdrawal.

The messenger model thus appears to be a contrasting foil if not a ‘counter model’ to the general understanding of ‘communication’ – consider, for example, the aspects that have to do with heteronomy, the extension of the senses, and self-neutralization. It can hardly be denied that the ‘good’ messenger is discursively powerless.\textsuperscript{26} I will now attempt to delve into this provocative aspect.

\textbf{On the Discursive Powerlessness of the Messenger}

Almost all of the facets that we have extracted from the speech of the messenger conform to an image of language use that contradicts the meaning of ‘communication’ and ‘linguisticality’ in philosophical discourse. When considered philosophically, the messenger represents a repulsive figure: He speaks not on his own behalf but rather on the behalf of foreigners. He does not think and mean what he says. He is not allowed to produce what
he says himself; he is not even permitted to understand what he says. The messenger is not responsible for the content of what he is assigned to say.

Already this list – and it could surely be expanded – shows in an obvious way that the figure of the messenger counteracts everything that we usually associate with speech from a theoretically ambitious perspective. The self-image of philosophy involves the practice and encouragement of a kind of speech that fundamentally overcomes and disavows the kind of communication practiced by the messenger. I will recall two paradigmatic deliberations on this issue from the beginning of ancient philosophy and modern philosophy.

The beginnings of classical philosophy in Greece were accompanied by the replacement of the concept of ‘angelia’ (message) with the concepts of ‘logos’, ‘idea’, and ‘nous’. Poets and rhapsodists were disparaged in Plato's *Ion* as part of a general discrediting of those who ‘only’ function as messengers, for poets were considered to be the interpreters of the gods and rhapsodists were considered to be the interpreters of the poets. Plato describes the kind of connection created by poetic mediation using the symbol of the magnet, whose powerful influence holds magnetized iron rings together. Whenever divine messages are delivered, their mediators remain dependent and ignorant. Philosophy can therefore only find its own form of speech, based on autonomous thought and knowledge, by critiquing and overcoming the messenger model of communication.

I will now shift to modern philosophy. In his *Discours de la Méthode* Descartes reflects on the difference between humans and machines, which also represents the difference between humans and animals because for Descartes animals are living machines. Humans and machines are different through language and reason, which also distinguish humans from animals. However, there are birds that speak without thinking. Descartes writes: ‘For we observe that magpies and parrots can utter words like ourselves, and are yet unable to speak as we do, that is, so as to show that they understand what they say.’ Doesn’t the speech of the messenger resemble the automaton-like speech of Descartes’s speaking birds? This is undoubtedly true and Bernhard Siegert, who calls attention to this connection, cites Azzo's *Summae Institutionum*: ‘A nuncius occupies the position of a letter; and he is just like the magpie […], and he is the voice of the ruler who sends him, and he repeats the words of the ruler.’

It is therefore apparent that the messenger is not in command of his speech, and it is not surprising that in his function as a transmitter he can also be easily replaced with non-human entities. Neutrality and indifference are inherent to the impersonal transmission event, and this is not only
invoked in the topos of the dying messenger but also culminates in the fact that messengers can be easily substituted by symbolic and technical information carriers. There is hardly anything as transmissible as the messenger function of transmission. The messenger is a person who fulfils his role by acting as if he is not a person. Messengers embody tasks that can often be accomplished just as well by the circulation and functionality of things. It could also be said that the messenger function is ‘ontologically neutral’: it can be performed personally, semiotically, or technically, and it usually involves the interaction of all three of these components.